



HOLLY

Latin: *Ilex aquifolium*

Welsh: Calynnen

This native evergreen has long been associated with Christianity and, more recently, with Christmas.

The tree was known as the Holy Tree until the C17th (an even earlier name was Holme, a name apparently derived from the OE hollin), probably because of its association with Christianity. In a Christian context, the red berries and spiky leaves of the holly have been interpreted as representing the sufferings (blood and crown of thorns) of Christ

The superstition that it was unlucky to cut down a holly tree may have arisen from the tree's evergreen leaves and long lasting red berries which led to an association with eternity and the power to ward off evil. This superstition often spared the Holly tree from the woodman's axe.

Such an association can be traced back to ancient Roman mythology where Holly was dedicated to the god Saturn. At the feast of saturnalia in December branches of Holly were exchanged as symbols of wealth and happiness and to keep away evil spirits which caused illness.

Pliny wrote that if a Holly tree was planted near an entrance door, or a branch hung over the door, the house and its inhabitants would be protected from poison, evil spirits, lightning and witchcraft.

The very dense wood of the Holly is used for carving, woodcuts and inlaying.

For birds, the leaves of the Holly provide a good protective shield from predators, and the berries a useful food source.

Holly produces both male and female plants, but only the female trees produce the winter berries. The berries are mildly toxic to humans